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CONTENT STUDIES AND CONTENT TEACHING

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I

The educational theorists are not enamored of rhetorical technicalities in general, but they do have an abiding interest in one instance of metonymy: they habitually make Latin and Greek stand for the whole system of traditional education. Bearing in mind that traditional education is as obnoxious to them as are traditional morals to the Bohemian, we find this, from their point of view, a most damaging aspersion against the languages in question (and to me personally inconvenient here, since I should prefer to have discussed the particular problems touching Latin teaching separately from the general problems of the whole standard curriculum). I suppose, however, that there must always be horrible examples in different kinds of depravity—Nero, Benedict Arnold, the classics. At least, there is conceded to all of these a shabby *raison d'être* in the warning they bear.

It is baldly stated in Mr. Flexner's article in the April *Atlantic Monthly* that the aim of the teaching of Latin and Greek is, quite ostentatiously, mental discipline; that only incidentally (and contradictorily) is any other claim advanced. "The languages are not learned; no one expects them to be learned. They are taught, not for the sake of their meanings, not to be used in suggesting ideas, but as a means of discipline." Now it is obviously one thing to say that mental discipline is derived from some line of study and quite another to say that this is the whole purpose of teaching it. No reputable teacher of the classics ever ventured, I feel sure, to maintain so monstrous a contention. Despite the frequent construction by pupils of maps of campaigns and wooden models of the bridge across the Rhine, I fear that the teaching of Caesar in high schools would very often justify a milder version of this accusation in results, though not in the

teachers' intentions. But that Cicero's orations do not carry to pupils anything of political interest and information, and that there is no human touch in the teaching of the *Aeneid*, are statements that are denied both by probability and observation. It is inconceivable that thousands of teachers have been for generations teaching languages with an utter disregard of the motive which Mr. Flexner so naïvely recommends in the phrase "as a medium for the communication of ideas."

When he says that no one expects the languages to be learned, he can scarcely mean "to be spoken" (though this frivolous purpose is sometimes insisted upon for ancient languages by critics); indeed, he specifically disavows that expectation in the phrase I have just quoted. What is meant is, evidently, to translate or read matter of ordinary difficulty with fair ease and facility. As long as we spend a generous share of the first twenty-five years of our lives in learning our native tongue, which is forced upon us at every turn, there must surely be some limit to the degree of mastery of a language which may reasonably be expected to be obtained in a maximum of four years' training in secondary schools. That, in spite of the rapid progress of sight translation, more proficiency might—yes, must—be achieved should be patent to every student of conditions; but this is a matter of method; and, by the way, writers against the classics regularly make capital of the methods in vogue in their childhood rather than of those obtaining in the better schools now.

This particular critic is opposed, not without reason, to formal grammar in elementary language work. It is worth noting that in no negligible number of instances Latin, and even Greek, is coming to be taught without the memorization of paradigms as a prerequisite to translation, that "direct" (not conversational) methods are being rapidly and successfully tried. But our critic is so exceptionally squeamish as to any kind of grammar, that it is painful for him to think, for instance, that "*arum* is a symbol mechanically identified with genitive plural." He says all symbols should be "keys to living subjects." He has here hit upon a great truth. There is the same academic narrowness and absence of contact with life about the symbol *arum* that there is about the arbitrary,

traditional insistence (by which we were all victimized) that *c-a-t* spells *cat*. We were not shown a cat (the "living subject") and told to spell the cat itself even; but were required to translate the word-symbol (the "key") into certain letter-symbols, all presumably "as a method of disciplining the will, the reason, the power of analysis." There is such a thing as making a bogie of the mechanics of the classroom and a fetish of the mechanics of the shop. When all is said, and historical philology being forgotten, the bulk of language is arbitrary, and has, as Professor Jastrow has said, "a higher logic of its own." In case the teaching of language has been unduly mechanical (and I believe it has) the fault lies in the method, not in the language.

II

In connection with his assertion that the subjects under consideration are taught almost entirely for mental discipline, Mr. Flexner feels that, where once in a while (constantly, it would seem to me) the idea of cultural advantage is also put forward, a serious contradiction is involved; that is, he feels that it is anomalous to say that we study the languages for their content—their cultural value—and also for the development of the mind. It is as if one were to say that a laborer could not work for the contents of his purse and at the same time harden his muscle for that or some other kind of work. The fact is that there are, even besides these two, substantial reasons for studying Latin and Greek; for instance, one cannot intelligently consult a dictionary without some knowledge of the former, at least; it is absurd to insist that any good to be derived from these studies is conditioned upon being able to read them fluently at sight. The combination of our faculties is so intricate that it would be impossible to isolate one or another, to train the memory on modern history without gaining any ability to reason on social and political cause and effect in the case at hand or in other similar cases where the names and details are different. No more can one exercise his powers in discrimination between shades of meaning in translation without gaining any power of discrimination where details are different. No arbitrary theory of the non-transference of mental powers from one field of thought

to another—a theory invented specially for polemics against fundamental education, an assumption convincing only to educational theorists—will destroy the facts of observation, which clearly indicate that this transference goes on about us incessantly.

There is no mental muscle such theorists say; there is a general health of the body from general exercise, but no general health of the mind from general exercise. Mr. Flexner is nervous about this line of thought. (1) He says that he declines “to be entangled in a discussion based upon metaphors,” as if anyone were attempting to base the discussion upon metaphors rather than to clarify it by them. (2) He is enough impressed by the significance of this comparison (not so far-fetched, considering the physiological basis of psychology), so that he thinks it safer to doubt general physical training also, saying guardedly, “The gymnasium may or may not train the muscles for other uses.” (3) He feels that mental discipline is overstressed, at any rate too confining. Very good, people get overtrained, athletically or mentally, and their hearts suffer in either case; this is exceptional and lamentable. This shifting position which the writer takes, with its secondary and tertiary lines of defense, does not deserve serious attack.

III

We come now to the content-subjects. Mr. Flexner believes in his educational volume on the strength of its table of contents. The question arising in my mind is as to whether certain subjects can guarantee their results without respect to teaching conditions. I should have expected the writer to be fairly sure of that in order to make his point, since he has already admitted that the traditional subjects can be of cultural value if correctly taught—the problem being one of method. Are these content-subjects automata that they can insure their own efficiency? Mr. Flexner cannot maintain this. He says, “The new content-subjects have largely shared the fate of the rest of the curriculum—they have been taught so as to train the mind.” Well, then, why this hue and cry after certain subjects to the exclusion of certain others, as if in a change of subjects were our salvation? And, further, if the classics are admittedly cultural if rightly taught, and the so-called

content-studies are admittedly taught like the others, what possible warrant is there for calling one group content-studies and denying that name to others, when the whole proposition is one of method according to the data furnished in the article here commented upon?

Here is Mr. Flexner's opportunity. In his "Modern School" he should show us how Latin ought to be taught, since he approves of it but not of the plan of previous Latin courses. If new subjects are needed, let them be added, as they have been added before. But I see no reason why they should have a monopoly opportunity. The theorists who talk of measuring results in education have a good and useful purpose, but in all fairness let them measure results, not merely as to the subjects they want to dislodge, but as to those which they especially foster and subsidize. Let us not try teaching some new subjects under ideal conditions, and speak slightly of others which we do not try at all. Somehow even the best-educated men have a predilection that the tangible must be real and that the spiritual is problematical. When the boy brings home a tabaret, or the girl a salad, from the high-school laboratories, the parents say, "At last we are getting results for all we've spent on the children." My objection here is not to the ennobling training the young people are getting, but to the obvious implication that only in such connections can we be sure of real progress. Because a course in the "Modern School" is manual or vocational, we shall not be justified in exempting it from the measurement of results; nor shall we be justified in employing only a measurement in terms of the coin of the realm.

There is, to be sure, need of content—intellectual and spiritual content—and this is needed in the subjects of the curriculum. It is admitted to be in those subjects. For pedagogical purposes in the public schools we are instructed not to demand any cerebral content in the pupils, not to blame them for anything. The answer to the problem is, then, easily to be gained by elimination. We need content-teachers and content-methods. I cannot guarantee that Latin, Greek, mathematics, English, history, science, will guarantee the quality of those who teach them, or of the methods. But I suspect I had better not guarantee that millinery and benchwork

will do that either. Paper is expensive now. The ten-dollar note will soon have hammer-value. Yet it is still cheaper to revise the printed curriculum than to employ better teachers and methods. However, I feel perversely that we had better revolutionize the teachers' methods when they need it than set them at teaching something else on the chance that they will teach that more effectively. We had better solve the problem. We had better untie the Gordian knot, not cut it.

IV

Dignified by italics, as it well deserves, there appeared in the article in question the assertion, "You train what you train." Upon this assertion rests, as I see it, the justification of the fundamental education upon which the generations have been raised. (I unhesitatingly admit thus the long persistence of this fundamental education, for the existence of old may be a substantial argument for anything; it could not conceivably in itself be an argument against anything.) "You train what you train." If you choose as your exclusive aim the securing of a certain content, you get what you have time to get in the school years. If you aim, besides that, to acquire an ability to acquire all your life, you get a bigger training potentially than the maximum the content people could except.

If we must train, not potentiality, but immediate power, our problem is as follows: A boy comes to school. Let us suppose he knows he wants to be a civil engineer—this is unlikely. Let us suppose he ought to be what he wants to be—this is dubious. If the serious-minded vocational guides should chance to catch the boys at the age of twelve, the latter would all end their days as cowboys or train-robbers; the girls at fifteen, they would all turn out to be "movie" actresses. But our model boy wants to be and ought to be a civil engineer. We train what we train. We train him to be a civil engineer. But he will live in the suburbs and should have a garden. We must separately train him to be a horticulturist; he cannot transfer any part of his scientific training to his gardening. As a civil engineer he will be thrown in contact with city governments; he must, then, be trained to be a citizen in a

specialized way to fit him for dealing with councils and commissions. We want him to marry. We train what we train. We must train him to be a husband; he has no general vigor and adaptability of intellect; he must learn economy, sexual hygiene, child psychology, etc.—all adapted specifically to the position of husband. And so we must do with his social, religious, commercial, and other instincts; we must begin at the beginning with each of them independently. This is precisely the way guinea-pigs and trick ponies are trained—every trick separately. No scheme of education could be more sordid and unpromising.

The whole problem, which is vastly larger than the cause of any one or several studies in the curricula, is this: Shall we have educational communism, the possession of a strictly limited supply of the objects of intellectual consumption; or educational socialism, the possession by the student of the tools of intellectual production? Shall we kill the goose or accumulate the golden eggs?